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Viewing cable 09ANKARA123, TURKEY REFOCUSES ON EU ACCESSION AHEAD

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09ANKARA123	2009-01-23 17:31	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Ankara

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SUBJECT: TURKEY REFOCUSES ON EU ACCESSION AHEAD

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Launching what many believe to be a make or

break year for Turkey's EU accession bid, PM Erdogan reinvigorated Turkey's efforts by naming Justice and Development Party (AKP) Vice Chairman Egemen Bagis as State Minister for EU Affairs and by visiting Brussels for the first time in nearly five years, January 18-20. Bagis, selection, the December 31 approval of the Turkish national program for the adoption of the Acquis, and recent progress on several prominent human rights issues paved the way for what GOT officials and European diplomats here have characterized as a successful start to a critical year. Although Erdogan's brusque manner and harsh political rhetoric did little to win over the European public, a more statesman-like performance during meetings with European officials reassured them of Turkey's commitment to the accession process. While critics contend that Bagis has more experience with the U.S. than the EU, European diplomats have told us they consider him an apt choice given his ready access to Prime Minister Erdogan, political ambition, and smooth manner in dealing with foreigners. With only the EU account to occupy him, Bagis will also have to time to be in Brussels often, which his predecessor FM Babacan did not. Still, many question whether he has the political heft to push EU-related reforms through a skeptical bureaucracy. End Summary.

An "American" in Brussels

¶2. (C) After months of speculation, PM Erdogan named ruling AKP Vice Chairman for Foreign Affairs and Istanbul MP Egemen Bagis as State Minister for EU Affairs January 8, replacing FM Babacan as lead negotiator for Turkey's accession process.

European Commission Political Counselor Diego Mellado told us the EU had pushed Turkey for several months to name someone else to the position due to slow progress in the accession effort and increasing demands on FM Babacan posed by Turkey's ambitious foreign policy agenda. With only the accession task to occupy his time, Bagis can employ better time management and focus on the complicated technical aspects, he added. GOT officials emphasized to us that Bagis, who earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees in the U.S., has extensive foreign policy experience and, in their view, is up to handling the demands of the job.

¶3. (C) European diplomats in Ankara have also expressed support for Bagis' selection, noting it provides desperately needed momentum to Turkey's EU bid. Calling Bagis "an American in Brussels," French Political Officer Bertrand Buchwalter highlighted that the AKP MP has a U.S., not European background. (Both Buchwalter and Mellado admitted that the AKP is short on qualified EU experts.) He added that Bagis, however, was the best choice from the cadre of other top contenders. Chairman of the Turkey-EU Joint Parliamentary Committee Aydin Dumanoglu lacked the necessary charisma to succeed in Brussels and MP Suat Kiniklioglu does not have access to the party's inner circle. In the end, Buchwalter opined that Bagis was the right man for the job because he has the ear of the Prime Minister (unlike Babacan, who is President Gul's protg) and the political ambition to succeed.

Mr. Erdogan Goes to Brussels

¶4. (C) Having not visited Brussels since 2004, Erdogan met with European Commission President Barroso, the Commission's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Solana, European Parliament President Pottering, and all European Parliament party heads during his January 18-20 trip. He also addressed audiences at several different venues. MFA EU Political Affairs Section Head Yaprak Alp told us Erdogan's visit was designed to underscore Turkey's enduring intention to join the EU, to solicit support of Turkish expectations that the Czech Presidency will open two additional chapters of the Acquis for negotiation, and to highlight Turkey's efforts to support Middle East initiatives. UK Embassy Political Officer Claire Phillpotts noted EU officials' main objectives were to simply get Erdogan to Brussels and have him publicly reiterate Turkey's dedication to the EU process.

15. (C) Both MFA officials and European diplomats in Ankara characterized Erdogan's visit as a success. Pottering reportedly said Erdogan came with a "silver tray of gifts," which included the December 31 adoption of the long awaited national program for adoption of the Acquis, Bagis, selection, the launch of state-run Turkish Television and Television's (TRT) Kurdish language channel, outreach to Turkey's minority Alevi community, and the restoration of author Nazim Hikmet's Turkish citizenship.

16. (C) In closed door meetings with EU officials, Erdogan reportedly was engaging, diplomatically answering questions on contentious issues (Armenian genocide, freedom of expression, and Kurdish rights) and emphasizing Turkey's desire to join the EU, according to Phillpotts. Erdogan also presented draft reports on the two chapters that Turkey hopes to be opened during the Czech Presidency ("taxation" and "social policy and empowerment"). He promised that after the nationwide local elections in March, Turkey will fulfill the criteria for opening those chapters, principally through increasing taxes on raki, Turkey's national anice-based alcoholic drink of choice. Following a public statement made early in his visit to Brussels that Turkey may not pursue a deal on the Nabucco pipeline as long as negotiations on the energy chapters remain blocked, Erdogan reportedly assumed a more conciliatory tone and repeatedly underscored that Turkey and the EU are energy partners. In his joint press conference with Barroso, Erdogan stated that Turkey is aware of its energy responsibilities and "won't let Europe down." Still, European Ambassadors in Ankara, commented Phillpotts, were disappointed that Erdogan failed to discuss domestic political reform in any of his meetings.

17. (C) Alp and her European colleagues noted, however, there seemed to be two Erdogans in Brussels. Although he said the right things behind closed doors, Erdogan in public harshly criticized Israeli actions in Gaza and gave little lip service to Turkey's desire to join the EU. Erdogan had the opportunity to be charming and plead Turkey's case to the European audience, argued Buchwalter, but chose instead to use the "same old bitter discourse." During his speech to the European Policy Center, for example, Erdogan only stated that EU membership was a priority for Turkey after a thirty minute diatribe on GOT accomplishments in the Middle East and a condemnation of Israeli actions in Gaza. While seemingly aiming for the Turkish voter, Erdogan's tone struck a negative chord with Europeans.

A Year of Living Dangerously?

18. (C) With ten EU accession chapters open, eight frozen in 2006 for Turkey's refusal to open Turkish ports and airports to EU member Cyprus and an additional five related to core criteria linked to eventual full EU membership blocked by France and Cyprus, EU officials tell us only six chapters remain feasible for opening in the near future. Having eliminated most of the low hanging fruit, Turkey's ability to open additional chapters for negotiations is contingent on implementing complex technical requirements and instituting contentious political reform, which GOT officials have repeatedly stated will not occur until after the March local elections, at the earliest. The EU is slated to review before the end of 2009 its position on the frozen chapters, as well as the GOT's progress in fulfilling its commitments made in the Ankara Protocol to open its ports to Cypriot vessels. Accordingly, the success of the ongoing Cyprus negotiations will play a crucial, if not determining, role in Turkey's ability to ensure its accession bid stays on track. If a Cyprus solution is reached, it could lead to the opening of the 8 frozen chapters and possibly another three or four. More importantly, Turkey might also be able to close chapters that have been successfully negotiated, which currently remain blocked by Nicosia.

19. (C) In addition to Cyprus, rhetoric surrounding the April European Parliamentary elections and September German

national elections is likely to draw Turkey into various intra-European political frays. Locally based and visiting European officials have repeatedly tried to prepare the GOT for the this, encouraging the Turks to look beyond the potentially ugly discourse. Alp commented that while the Turkish bureaucracy will understand the situation, it will be hard for the Turkish public to ignore. Although 2009 is full of landmines, underscored Mellado, it also has an abundance of opportunities. Istanbul is the 2009 European Cultural Capital. The French Cultural Season of Turkey begins in July and other Turkish festivals are planned through Europe. Alp added that former Finnish President Marti Ahtissaari and the Independent Commission on Turkey plans to publish a second report this year. As the first report issued in October 2004 helped push the EU to offer Turkey a start date for formal negotiations, the Turks view this as a positive sign.

The EU Great Train Robbery

¶10. (C) Despite the relative success of Erdogan's visit and apparent renewed commitment of the GOT to its EU vocation, some European diplomats have expressed concern that Turkey believes it can manipulate the accession process. Mellado underscored that Turkey must get over its zero-sum attitude and understand that requirements for membership are universal and non-negotiable. If Turkey wants to join, it must comply with the same standards as other candidates. Buchwalter bemoaned that Turkey refuses to see compliance with the 1995 Customs Agreement as anything more than a ploy by Cyprus. He highlighted a December 18 MFA statement where the GOT "called on the EU to honor its commitments and to adopt an approach free from political consideration with regards to our accession negotiations." Furthermore, many GOT officials, he asserted, believe that the EU will not jeopardize Cyprus reunification talks by refusing to unfreeze chapters. Phillpotts added that Turkey is coming to see energy as another trump card. Nevertheless, Turkey will not deviate far from its EU path while AKP is in sole power, argued Mellado. In Turkey, being anti-EU accession will not get you votes. The prospect of EU membership is also an "insurance policy" for the AKP against ardently secularist enemies, said Mellado.

Comment

¶11. After two years of virtual atrophy, Erdogan's visit and his selection of Bagis started a watershed year on the right track. With only one task at hand, Bagis will have the necessary time to spend in Brussels to smooth ruffled European feathers and to engage on many of the technical aspects neglected by FM Babacan over the last year. Still, some experts doubt that Bagis will have the necessary patience to review hundreds of pages of technical regulations. In Ankara, it is an untested premise that Bagis will have the political clout to influence the internal process. Although he has access to PM Erdogan, many question whether he has the political heft to push EU-related reforms through a skeptical bureaucracy. Some also wonder whether FM Babacan, who reportedly did not gladly surrender his EU Negotiator position, will throw the full support of the Foreign Ministry behind him. Already, Babacan has invited undersecretaries from all relevant ministries to the MFA to discuss how to increase the momentum Turkey's EU bid, an initiative that properly belongs with Bagis. For him to make progress, Bagis will simultaneously need to develop a strong support base in both Brussels and Ankara. Even so, his efforts may be overshadowed by developments in the Cyprus talks.

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Jeffrey